

'Eco-grief' over climate change felt by generations of B.C. residents

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Body

Claire Dooley was 13 when climate change first hit home. It was 2015, and the first year she saw the wildfire smoke blanketing her Vancouver neighbourhood.

"It was scary to look outside and see the smoke invading my childhood memories," she said. "It's everywhere in my hometown and the place I grew up, where all my childhood memories are - it's almost claustrophobic."

Now 16, Dooley has been increasingly worried about the changing climate, fearing the world may be completely different only a few years from now when she embarks upon adulthood.

"I think in today's world of climate change, it's terrifying to be growing up in it ... I just feel like it's this thought that's in my mind all the time," she said. "I have two years until I graduate and it's really hard to try and follow my dreams when I don't know what the world will look like."

Claire is one of a new generation determined to love the Earth while they can because they believe it will be gone all too soon. Climate change has created a generation that feels what experts are calling 'ecological grief.'

More researchers have been looking into the psychological effects of climate change, especially since experts have warned that the cycle of fires and floods in B.C. appear to be here to stay. A 2017 recent study on health impacts of a smoky summer in Yellowknife showed that people demonstrated feelings of fear and isolation due to the rapidly changing climate, calling the feeling "ecological grief" over the loss of the environment they once knew.

Byran Buraga, a 19-year-old public policy student and former director of Kids for Climate Action, has seen the B.C. climate shift in a worrying direction in the past few years, and said he is "absolutely" concerned about climate change.

He grew up in Vancouver, and while he is now going to school in Montreal, he has returned to B.C. for the past two summers expecting a season of beautiful weather. But now memories of wildfire smoke are prominent in his mind, prompting fears that the summer climate in B.C. may be forever changed.

"This year, once again near the tail end of the summer, one of the last memories I had was super-smoky conditions and not being able to enjoy the B.C. environment," he said. "I'm worried this indicates the start of a new pattern and it will affect the way of life and increased health problems for people."

One of the things Buraga enjoyed was going out to Kitsilano Beach with his family. He worries those beach days may now be a rarity, for him and future generations.

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"I liked just laying down a mat and taking in the sights in the water from the beach, having a nice picnic and seeing the view," he said. "But because of the wildfires, there's no more sun and you can't do that. Those experiences of going out to enjoy nature, I'm worried I won't be able to share that with my kids."

Dooley's view of the world is wildly different from just two generations before, when the major generational fear was the threat of nuclear invasion. Jean Swanson, a 75-year old anti-pipeline protester and Vancouver city-council candidate, said that climate change is one of the many issues that the current generation has inherited from the past.

"I remember hiding under desks. That was my generation," said Swanson, remembering the looming Cold War threat of being bombed, where schoolchildren were instructed to duck and cover for safety.

Swanson said things have not necessarily gotten better. Instead, "these things are compounding" with the threat of climate change, as well as war, economic failure, and other issues being inherited by the current generation instead of fixed.

For Swanson, the fear is that she will not be able to share the wonders of the world with her grandchildren.

"I want my grandson to see the glaciers before they are lost," she said.

This sense of anxiety and tension around climate change is beginning to be studied more in-depth by researchers looking into the health of people closely impacted it.

Dr. Ashlee Cunsolo, director of the Labrador Institute at Memorial University, recently coined the term "ecological grief" to describe an emotion that kept coming up in her work with Inuit communities in Northern Labrador. She was looking into how climate change was impacting these remote communities, interviewing more than 90 people about the ways in which the changes to the land had impacted their health.

"The mental health impacts were actually what people were identifying as their biggest concern," she said.

Surprised by this finding, she began to delve more into the topic, looking into how people were affected by the "summer of smoke" in Yellowknife in 2014 and partnering with Australian researchers looking into farmers dealing with drought. She found that a sense of loss was increasingly common.

"There's been an evolution where a lot of people were talking about grief and mourning related to a changing climate. There are a whole range of emotions, like grief, with the sense of losing something special, and something beloved."

While her research has been focused on a select few remote communities, Cunsolo said that the sense of grief and anxiety around climate change can affect everyone because we are all impacted by the climate.

"People are differently vulnerable but we are all vulnerable to the various impacts of climate change."

Cunsolo said that young people aren't alone in their worries about the future. When her paper on ecological grief was first published, she said she was "inundated" by readers who told her that she had touched on a feeling they had been unable to describe.

"This is something so many people are experiencing, and likely will continue to experience," she said.

But the wildfires, and climate change in general, are also impacting mental health in more urgent ways.

Sarah Hamid-Balma, the director of mental health promotion at the B.C. Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association, said that she has seen climate change impact mental health on two levels: the immediate mental distress caused from being forced to evacuate, and the more subtle, prolonged feeling of anxiety or loss for people who are seeing the smoke and watching the crisis unfold from afar.

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To help people dealing with emotions related to the first situation, the CMHA has launched a confidential help line - "Talk in Tough Times" - for people who may be struggling to recover from the trauma of the 2017 wildfires evacuations.

"For people who have been evacuated or were on alert last year, the news is reminding them or triggering a sense of loss. For some people the stress can also be a huge trigger," said Hamid-Balma.

She also said that while there isn't any data available for how the wildfire smoke has impacted people's overall mental health or worries about the climate, it is an issue something they are interested in studying. Hamid-Balma said that most people in her office have "at least one or two people" talk to them about these types of worries and more information is needed to understand the phenomena.

Young people are finding their own ways of dealing with their feelings. This past spring Dooley joined her high school classmates in a production of Happy Thoughts, a play that explored an "end-of-the-world" scenario where people had been oblivious to global warming and climate change until the world was destroyed. She said the idea for the story immediately resonated with her peers, who tried to inject the scenario with a bit of humour.

But Dooley said that it seems like the world has already changed for good. Climate change looms so large, that she said it's hard to just be a young person without worrying about how she can help the planet.

"We have such a big obligation to the world around us, we can't even be kids anymore," she said.

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